# Russia's Expanding Footprint in Libya Poses a Strategic Challenge to Europe

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During the last several years, Russia has been developing Libya into a strategic node into a larger geopolitical plan in Africa and the Mediterranean. Since 2020, Moscow has invested significantly to create a fragmented state in Libya, as a staging ground for Russia's geopolitical interests. This development creates a serious challenge for European governments, which must react quickly and decisively before weakening the southern periphery of Europe before Russia's inroads in North Africa.

Libya's relevance has revived diplomatic discussions in Europe. It was the predominant item on the Agenda of the EU Foreign Affairs Council of June 2025 and subject of a recent bilateral between French President Emmanuel Macron and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. While Libya had once been given up as a failed intervention, it bears attention now because of potential risks associated with  emerging Russian influence.

Prime Minister Meloni has recently alarmed regarding the possibility that Russian missile systems capable of reaching southern Europe will be deployed in Libya. Some of her alarmist rhetoric was embellished by the media, but the basic concern is still legitimate—Moscow represents a systematic and strategic expansion of military infrastructure in Libya, giving it a position from which it can effectively influence African affairs and develop new alliances.

Military experts have detected relationships between the Russian-run airbases in Libya and continuing armed struggles in Sudan and in the Central African Republic, as Moscow-supported forces have historically provided support to armed factions and repressive regimes. Russian action in the Sahel (Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso) has occurred while regional transitions of alliances occurred away from Western institutions (ECOWAS) to alternatives and security arrangements with Russian support.

One of the more insidious elements of Russia's approach is the complex disinformation campaigns they are implementing that capitalize on anti-Western sentiments and the successful pushback of French or EU forces in parts of Africa, including Chad.

Despite the narratives describing Russia as Africa's new security solver and guarantor, the results have at best been mixed. In Mali, Moscow's mercenary forces have suffered significant casualties as Jihadist activity increases. Russia continues to perpetuate its relations to extract economic advantage. This has often been through illicit means. In Libya, the Haftar family, as actors on the ground and having control in Eastern and Southern Libya, enabled Moscow's access to oil facilities and smuggling networks (effectively building a mafia state under foreign patronage).

This partnership has also been used to bypass international sanctions on Russian oil, allowing Moscow to discreetly misappropriate energy resources into European markets or towards like-minded regimes across the continent. In addition, Russian-linked networks are key players in the arms trade and facilitate drug trafficking and flows of human migration, all of which have been weaponized in political turmoil in Europe.

Russian engagement with Khalifa Haftar is a manifestation of its wider geopolitical doctrine that some analysts have characterized as a modern anti-Western manifesto. The doctrine—called the “Karaganov Doctrine”—promotes Russia as a new decolonizing force in the Global South, which in essence has been reduced to placing authoritarian leaders in power to extract the natural resources.

An example is a recent compromise to develop the Tobric's Libya port with Belarus, which will provide another capacity for Moscow to influence the Mediterranean. These tasks indicate that the Russian regime not only wants to fund its war in Ukraine, but also intends to establish itself firmly as a regional player.

Europe, meanwhile, has been slow to respond. This inactivity allows Libya to become another lever for Russian involvement. However, there are tangible steps that European policy makers can take: the cold property of Russian-Judge smugglers, eliminating the logistics chain run by shell companies, and carrying forward legal matters in international courts.

More importantly, Europe should provide Libya a meaningful option. This involves protecting important infrastructure to support the oil industry-skilled actors and, in the long-term, support the country's long-standing democratic transition. Without such efforts, Europe is faced with a growing security crisis crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

*Muhammad Salman is a Graduate scholar of IR at NUML Islamabad and intern at Islamabad policy research institute, IPRI. His research areas include International political economy, Int'l development, Chinese Politics and Asian geopolitics.*

*Muhammad Umar Nasir is a bachelor's student of International Relations at NUML Islamabad. He is a research intern at Asian Politico. His area of interest is the geopolitics and geo-economics of South Asia.*